

Kevin Diaz and Jeremy Herb, *Star Tribune*

Minnesota delegation has mixed feelings about extending tax cuts to wealthy.

WASHINGTON - President Obama's tax deal with Republican leaders presents an anguished choice for many liberals in Congress, none more so than Minnesota Democrats who have steadfastly opposed extending tax cuts for the wealthy.

With details of the economic package emerging from the White House, Minnesota Sens. Amy Klobuchar and Al Franken avoided much public comment on Tuesday. Emerging from a closed-door Democratic caucus meeting with Vice President Joe Biden, Franken said that he was "weighing" the deal.

Klobuchar left the meeting without speaking to reporters. Her aides said only that she was "reviewing" the agreement. Like Franken, Klobuchar has released no statement on the accord, which would preserve the Bush-era tax cuts for families at all income levels for two years, extend jobless benefits a year and cut payroll taxes by 2 percentage points for all workers through 2011.

Minnesota Republicans were decidedly more upbeat, though hardly effusive, with Rep. Michele Bachmann calling it a "temporary solution."

Obama, meanwhile, offered a pointed defense of his actions. "This is a big, diverse country," he said at a news conference. "Not everyone agrees with us. In order to get stuff done, we're going to compromise."

Like their counterparts from other states, Minnesota's congressional delegation expressed mixed feelings about the deal.

"There are a lot of questions I will need to have addressed before I can decide if I will support a tax cut for millionaires that will cost more than the stimulus package which Republicans opposed so bitterly," said Rep. Jim Oberstar, D-Minn., who lost his House seat in November after 18 terms in Congress.

Republican leaders say they expect the lame-duck session of Congress to approve the deal before lawmakers adjourn later this month, even though some expressed only lukewarm support. Troy Young, a spokesman for Republican Rep. John Kline, soon to be the only committee chair from Minnesota, called the deal "far from perfect," but one that "heeded the call of Republicans to ensure no one faces a tax increase."

Bachmann, founder of the House Tea Party Caucus, said that while the extension would "at least offer a foundation for job creation for the immediate future," the overall compromise remains a "hard" vote for Republicans. She said she would have preferred permanent tax cuts that were not linked to an extension of unemployment benefits that she says will deepen the deficit.

Reaching out

One of the most positive reviews came from Rep. Erik Paulsen, R-Minn. "I like what I see," he said. "I like the approach. I like that the president is reaching out."

Critics said the deal, designed to give both Democrats and Republicans something that they want, could add as much as \$900 billion to the national debt, moving in the opposite direction of what reformers on both sides of the aisle have advocated.

"This is a deal that will continue to explode the deficit while the rich get richer and struggling middle-class families get crumbs," said Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn. "The Republicans successfully held unemployed Americans hostage to give even more tax cuts to millionaires."

McCollum was the only Minnesota Democrat to state unequivocally that she will vote against the package, although Rep. Keith Ellison, co-chair of the Progressive Caucus, called on Democrats to "hold firm on passing a middle-class tax cut with no strings attached."

Others, while critical, were far more circumspect.

"I am disappointed," said Rep. Tim Walz, D-Minn. "However, I do not believe that compromise, by virtue, is a bad thing and so I am willing to consider this proposal. That being said, I have not made a decision."

High threshold failed

In several votes in the House and Senate last week, Walz and most other Minnesota Democrats voted to limit the tax cuts to families earning less than \$250,000. The one exception was "Blue Dog" Rep. Collin Peterson, one of 20 Democrats who voted against setting that income threshold.

The House approved the \$250,000 cutoff by a vote of 234-188. In the Senate, Democrats could muster only 53 votes, seven short of the 60 needed to break a GOP filibuster. A separate vote on a \$1 million threshold also failed. Those votes, taken Saturday, set the stage for Obama's compromise with Republican leaders, which some Democrats see as capitulation.

Franken, in a brief interview with the Star Tribune, said that "I thought we should have fought on the \$250,000 or at least the million (dollar threshold) longer."

Ellison said Democrats should direct their anger not at the president, but at Republicans. "You can attack the president to the point that you're going to get a Republican president, so just keep that in mind," Ellison told Politico. "This is not about the president. It's [about what] Republicans are demanding."

While Democrats accused Republicans of playing up to the very rich at the expense of the unemployed, Republicans countered that across-the-board tax cuts will help small businesses and employers who provide jobs. Said Bachmann: "We aren't talking about giving tax cuts to millionaires sitting in leather chairs lighting cigars with hundred-dollar bills."